

NATIONALISM

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Introduction

The emergence of the notion of nationalism is often connected with the French Revolution of 1789, when the first “nation-state” is said to have been created. Although states where the boundaries of the state and the nation coincide have existed earlier, before 1789 states had not used the situation to their advantage to the extent that France was able to. It is here that nationalism entered as such a powerful idea.

For Walter Bagehot “‘nation-making’ was the essential content of nineteenth-century evolution.”¹ Indeed, although most of Europe’s nations were created only in the 20th century, the seeds for their emergence were sowed in the previous century, during which empires slowly began to crumble. The same century also saw the first instances of state-creation, where the clearly defined goal was to unify a nation under one state, as in Italy and Germany.

In this paper, I will examine the nature of nationalism: what its characteristics are, how it emerged and how it has developed. The term defies any attempts of simple definition, which means that several aspects and angles need to be considered. It is doubtful that nationalism can ever be defined in one coherent way, but must rather be given various characteristics depending on where and when the term is used.

Once a general framework of nationalism has been established, I will turn to look at ‘nationalism in action’, i.e. how it unfolded in Europe after the 1848 revolutions. The creation of the Italian and German states, probably the most important events of the latter 19th century, will be looked at in most detail, although other nationalist movements will also be examined.

Previous literature²

As nationalism is not a very old idea, the literature discussing it has all been written in less than two centuries. What makes the period of useful literature even shorter is the fact that literature written in the classic period of 19th century liberalism is “little other than

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 23.

² This section is based heavily on the excellent account in *ibid.*, pp. 2-8, and all quotes are from that work, unless otherwise specified.

nationalist and racist rhetoric”. Men such as John Stuart Mill and Ernest Renan have been credited with writing the best works of that time, and some of their ideas will be discussed later in this paper.

These are the works that are most relevant for the time period considered in this paper, namely the second half of the 19th century. During that time nationalism was a topic only in Europe, while in the 20th century it spread throughout the world. Authors writing about nationalism today must take many more aspects into account than those European writers of the previous century.

The subject received increased attention at the end of World War I, as the ideas of nationalism and self-determination were used in redrawing the map of Europe. The ‘twin founding fathers’ of the academic study of nationalism, Carleton B. Hayes and Hans Kohn have been credited with the “main innovation of the period”, that nations are not “as old as history”, but that the “modern notion of the word is no older than the eighteenth century”.

According to Eric Hobsbawm, the most fruitful era for the study of nations and nationalism has been roughly between 1968-88, when “the number of works genuinely illuminating the question of what nations and national movements are and what historical role they play is larger... than for any earlier period twice the length.”

Having looked briefly at the development of the study of nationalism, I will now examine the nature of nationality and nationalism.

The Question of Nationality

It is, in general, a necessary condition of free institutions that the boundaries of government should coincide in the main with those of nationality... Where the sentiment of nationality exists in any force, there is a *prima facie* case for uniting all the members of the nationality under the same government, and a government to themselves apart.³

This definition of nationalism is hardly disputed: that it is the desire to match national and political borders. What then becomes a great matter of dispute is how these national borders should be drawn, i.e. what constitutes a nation. To come up with a definition for one

³ John Stuart Mill, as quoted in Anthony Smith, Theories of Nationalism (2nd ed.) (London: Duckworth, 1983), p. 9.

particular nationality is not that difficult, but to come up with one definition under which all nationalities fit is close to impossible. One writer gives no less than ten preconditions of nationality, ranging from a unit of territory to a “hope that the nation will have a great and glorious future”.⁴ Joseph Stalin has given a more concise definition: “A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture.”⁵

One criterion that was established early in the 19th century for defining nations was Renan’s “threshold principle,” which stated that peoples had to be large enough before they could be thought of as nations. This was a commonly accepted idea throughout the 19th century, supported by, among others, the great Italian nationalist Mazzini, who, because of the principle, “did not envisage independence for Ireland.”⁶ In fact, the question on the size of viable nations continued well into the 20th century, and still in 1969 the United Nations Security Council discussed a population of one million as a minimum limit for membership in the UN.⁷

In contrast to such objective definitions, nationality has also been defined subjectively, as “an every-day plebiscite” or, like Mill puts it, where “the sentiment on nationality exists.” According to this definition, those peoples that see themselves as nations are such, even if they do not meet any other criteria. This thought follows the ideas of Rousseau’s “general will” and Hegel’s “spirit of the people.” Clearly, using such a definition to distinguish nationalities is even more difficult than using that of Stalin. Granting a nation to any group of people who regard themselves as one is the recipe for anarchy, but distinguishing between valid and invalid claims of nationality is a quagmire that continues to cause international headaches to this day in places such as Kosovo, East Timor and Chechnya.

⁴ Urban Whitaker (editor), Nationalism and International Progress, (San Francisco: Howard Chandler, 1960), p. 5.

⁵ As quoted in Eric Hobsbawm, op. cit., p. 5.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 31.

⁷ Max Jakobson, who was Finland’s representative in the Security Council at the time, gives himself the honor of ending the discussion on population limits by what he calls “the shortest speech in UN history: ‘Good-bye Iceland!’” Max Jakobson, Väkivallan vuodet (Keuruu: Otava, 1999), p. 23.

The Nature of Nationalism

“Nationalism is in itself neither good nor bad, as little as capitalism, socialism or imperialism are.”⁸ But several authors distinguish between two kinds of nationalism, which in fact are “good” and “bad”. The “good” kind is confined, meaning that nationalists are merely striving to create, or maintain their own nation, and “the world had room for as many nationalisms as there were nations.” It was this kind of nationalism that overwhelmed Europe in the 19th century, and conflicts arising from it were either “between a nationality and an alien master [or] conflicts between nations over the delimitation of their respective boundaries.”⁹

The “bad” kind of nationalism pitted one own’s “superior” nation or race against all others in a struggle for survival of the fittest. It is this kind of nationalism that gave nationalism its bad name in Europe through the actions of men like Adolf Hitler and Slobodan Milosevic in the 20th century, but it emerged outside of Europe already in the 19th century, when Europeans’ applied it in their attitudes towards peoples living in their colonies.

Related to this differentiation of nationalism is its two-sided characteristic of being both a unifying as well as a disintegrating force. Originally, nationalism was used only to unite, as in when used in France to rally the entire nation to fight its enemies in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Afterwards, depending on the circumstances, it became either unifying, as in Italy and Germany, or disintegrating, as in the Habsburg and Ottoman empires. But there was still no doubt that its unifying principle was the more valid one, and “Balkanization” clearly gained a negative connotation.

History of Nationalism

Why nationalism emerged in 19th century Europe to such an extent as to change the course of history is not as difficult to establish as a definition for it. The spread of literacy, and thus of national languages at the expense of the language of the empire; economic reasons, when nationalism could help in creating bigger markets for business, like in Germany and Italy; and the ambitions of national lower gentry to take over middle-class

⁸ Urban Whitaker (editor), op. cit., p. 22.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 107.

business operated mostly by foreigners, especially in Eastern Europe, are but a few examples of causes for rising nationalistic feeling in Europe.¹⁰ Additionally, the use of nationalism in post-revolution France to counter a foreign threat has been mentioned previously.

The 1848 revolutions have been called the “springtime of peoples,” despite the fact that the revolutions themselves failed to change any nationality’s situation, or anything else - except the emancipation of Serfs in the Habsburg Empire - for that matter:

1848 appears as the one revolution in the modern history of Europe which combines the greatest promise, the widest scope, and the most immediate initial success, with the most unqualified and rapid failure.¹¹

However, the year acts well as a turning point in time after which nationalism becomes more and more a force to be reckoned with. In fact, it is the last time that reactionary forces gain the advantage over nationalism: history henceforth is little more than the triumph of nationalism throughout Europe.

The 1848 revolutions went furthest in those areas where nationalism played an important part in the revolutions, as in Hungary. But it was only a decade after the revolutions that nationalism began to assert itself in earnest. The first major effect it caused on the European system was in Italy, where it nevertheless remained the ideology of the educated, not of the masses.

The Birth of Italy

The creation of Italy is a fascinating period of history to study. The unification began in 1860, when most of the Italian states were united under Piedmont and its premier Camillo Cavour from the north, and Giuseppe Garibaldi and his revolutionaries from the south. The Austrian possessions, which were not conquered in 1860, were joined in 1866 with the help of Bismarck, and the papal states were annexed only in 1870. But it was before and during 1860 that Cavour in particular showed the most extraordinary finesse to unite his country.

¹⁰ For a thorough discussion of these and other causes, see Eric Hobsbawm, The Age of Revolution 1789-1848 (New York: Random House, 1996), chapter 7.

¹¹ Eric Hobsbawm, The Age of Capital 1848-1875 (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), p. 15.

Italy had been something of a playground for the great powers, especially France and Austria. It would not have been possible to unite Italy by defying both of those powers. So Cavour successfully lured the erratic Napoleon III of France on his side with Nice and Savoy as rewards. Napoleon thought he was weakening Austria by creating a more powerful, but by no means a unified, Italy. By the time he backed down of his Italian expedition by signing an armistice with Austria at Villafranca on July 11, 1859, the unification of the entire peninsula was in full speed.

If Cavour's tactics in the north were those of power politics, Garibaldi in the south carried out a stereotypically "popular revolt." "Garibaldi's thousand" conquering most of southern Italy has become something of a myth, and it has seemed to have been successful because Garibaldi was able to harness the support of the masses, particularly the peasants. Their belief in "the saints, the Virgin, the Pope, and (outside Sicily) the Bourbon King" did not seem at all incompatible with Garibaldi's "belief in a radical-democratic, secular and even vaguely 'socialist' republic".¹²

"Quick thinking, fast talking and some brilliant maneuvering were required before Garibaldi was persuaded to hand over power to the king in 1860."¹³ It was once again Cavour that was behind this persuasion, and he is the most important man behind Italy's unification, although not to the same extent as Bismarck would become in Germany.

What role nationalism played in Italy's unification is an interesting question. Clearly, Garibaldi's campaign did have strong elements of nationalism in it, far more so than Cavour's in the north did. But Metternich had called Italy "merely a geographic expression," and even as united it was not clear what being Italian meant. Other than language, there was little that Italians had in common, and even language was only common at the levels of the elite. Italy "had perhaps the oldest common literary culture of its elite" in Europe,¹⁴ but an estimate of only two-and-a-half percent of the population used the "national language" for everyday purposes, while the rest "spoke various and often mutually incomprehensible idioms."¹⁵ It is therefore not surprising that in the first parliamentary meeting of the newly

¹² *ibid.*, p.190.

¹³ *ibid.* p. 73.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, p. 38.

unified Italian Kingdom, Massimo d'Azeglio admitted: "We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians."¹⁶

The Unification of Germany

If Italy's situation was one that required diplomatic finesse, Germany's was so to the extreme. The Congress of Vienna in 1815 had created a delicate German Confederation in Central Europe to contain France, but it was evident that any closer union between the numerous German states would disturb the balance of power.

Before Bismarck, it was assumed that were Germany to unite, it would do so in a democratic way, something akin the Frankfurt Conference in 1848. Instead, Bismarck united it with "blood and iron." Much in the same way as Italy became an extension of Piedmont's power, Germany became the extension of Prussia's. The King of Prussia became the Emperor of Germany as the King of Piedmont had become Italy's.

Bismarck's program to unite Germany was as fast as it was ruthless. Becoming Prussia's premier in 1862, he went to war together with Austria against Denmark to expel it from Schleswig in 1864, only to turn against Austria two years later in helping Italy gain the Austrian possessions in Italy and expelling Austria's influence from the German Confederation. He further undermined Austria by ensuring Hungary's autonomy in the newly created Austria-Hungary in 1867. The Prusso-French War in 1870-71 was the finale of his campaign, ending in the declaration of the German Empire in the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles on January 18, 1871.

Once again, as in Italy, nationalism was not the main driving force of unification. In his book *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger writes:

The new united Germany did not embody the ideals of the two generations of Germans who had aspired to build a constitutional, democratic state. In fact, it reflected no previous significant strain of German thinking, having come into being as a diplomatic compact among German sovereigns rather than as an expression of popular will. Its legitimacy derived from Prussia's power, not from the principle of national self-determination.¹⁷

¹⁶ As quoted in *ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁷ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), p. 133.

Nevertheless, Bismarck did claim to be uniting the Germans, and refrained from doing so only when he thought it simply impossible, as with Austrian Germans. Even if power politics was the driving force behind Bismarck, it is clear that without a national feeling the German state would not have held together up to today, but would have disintegrated like all the other multinational empires of Europe. Although today's Germany is much smaller than Bismarck's is, it is so simply because German leaders after Bismarck did not have his self-constraint, and attempted to grow beyond the nation's borders. In effect, Germany is a clear example of the difference between the "good" and "bad" kinds of nationalism: as long as Germany, under Bismarck, was merely uniting its own nation under one state, it was successful as it did not directly threaten other nations. Only once it became self-aware of its power, and attempted to assert its authority over other nations did the rest of Europe turn against it.

Disintegrating nationalisms

However large or small the significance of nationalism in Italy and Germany was, they were nevertheless exceptional cases in Europe not only because of their size, but because they were integrating forces. Everywhere else, nationalism emerged as a reaction to alien rule, and has done so ever since. Nationalism caused the end of the age of empires, and it began to strangle them from the moment it appeared.

The Magyar movement in Hungary has already been mentioned. After the brutal put-down of the 1848 revolution in Budapest by what became the first instance of Russian military involvement in Hungarian unrest, the Hungarians began reasserting themselves in the 1860s. The 'Compromise' of 1867 granted Hungary wide autonomy, simultaneously creating the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Although Hungarians demanded national self-determination from the Austrians, they did not see those nationalities living under their rule as having that same right. It was only at the end of World War I that the numerous nationalities of Austria-Hungary gained self-determination, and in the case of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia the process lasted until the 1990s.

The disintegration in the Ottoman Empire caused the "Balkanization" of the Balkans. Greece, Serbia, Rumania and Bulgaria all became independent as the empire withdrew.

Once independent, these nations could not decide where the national boundaries between them went, resulting in a series of wars known as the Balkan Wars. Macedonia, for example, was contested by Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece, all stressing various aspects of nationality: religion, common history and ethnographic arguments. Curiously, the “idea that the various nationalities living on this territory should be distinguished by their *language*, was the last of many to strike the states of Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria and the Sublime Porte”.¹⁸

In Western Europe, Ireland continued to contest English hegemony through what has commonly been called the first instance of mass nationalism, anticipating the “revolutionary national movements of under-developed countries in the twentieth century.”¹⁹ Despite having popular support, Irish nationalism did not succeed in winning an Irish Free State until after World War I.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that nationalism has been the most influential ideological force of the twentieth century. Through its success, it greatly undermined that other revolutionary concept of the 19th century, socialism. Clearly, national consciousness has been a much more important influence on people than international class-consciousness.

Nationalism has also developed through the two centuries. What was originally “romantic nationalism,” arguing for the self-determination of peoples, became “racist nationalism,” positioning one’s own people above all others, or at least one’s closest neighbors. Certainly both have coexisted, and still do, but with “ethnic cleansing” having become a household term, nationalism at the expense of others, rather than along with others, seems to be grabbing the headlines.

It would make an interesting study to see whether this change has any relation to the fact that nationalism has also become a mass movement since its original appearances in Europe. Perhaps nationalism becomes truly popular only when it starts asserting its superiority over others.

Whether nationalism was a development that could have been predicted before it spilled on the world stage is debatable, but once it emerged it proved to be impossible to

¹⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, p. 107.

¹⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital 1848-1875*, p. 93.

push back, as is witnessed by the continuing influence it imposes on the world even today. For better or worse, nationalism needs to be reckoned with.

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